Scoping report

Helpful and unhelpful factors in school-based counselling: clients’ perspectives

Gillian Griffiths – December 2013
Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a review of qualitative research to identify the factors that young people find helpful and unhelpful in the school-based counselling they have experienced. A systematic search of electronic databases and grey literature was conducted. Nine studies were found to meet the inclusion criteria for this review. A qualitative meta-analysis identified the relevant information from the selected studies and this led to the formulation of meta-categories.

Results show that young people report the most helpful aspect in the process of school-based counselling to be the opportunity to talk openly and be listened to. Other factors also seen as important are counsellors’ strategies and guidance, the chance to get things off their chest, to feel understood, accepted and not judged. Young people value counselling being a self-directed process, providing an opportunity for insight, self-awareness and problem solving. The counsellor’s independence and personal qualities, as well as the confidentiality of counselling, are all considered helpful.

Although the reporting of unhelpful factors was found to be low, there are a number of issues which would be useful to consider when developing counselling interventions. These include practical issues such as anxieties about missing lessons, wanting more counselling, wanting more counsellor input, lack of confidentiality, students being unaware of the service, and students finding it difficult to talk.

This systematic review offers a clear understanding of the process of counselling from the young person’s perspective. Taking account of clients’ views may improve experiences of school-based counselling and lead to more effective services which are responsive to client needs. There is a necessity for further rigorous research to be carried out in this area and for findings to be disseminated. Young people’s voices should be heard and specific questions regarding their experiences should be asked.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who responded to the request for papers throughout the systematic search. Special thanks to Mick Cooper, Karen Cromarty and Katie McArthur, for their help and encouragement.
Gillian Griffiths has almost 20 years’ experience of teaching in schools across the UK and in Japan. Throughout this time she has had a particular interest in specific learning difficulties, and the health and wellbeing of children and young people. Gillian is the author of Goodbye Baby (Saint Andrew Press, 2010), a book for young children who have experienced the loss of a sibling. She has recently completed an MSc in Psychological Counselling from the University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University. Gillian works part-time as an additional support needs teacher, a volunteer school counsellor with Place2Be and as a member of the Patient and Family Support Team for Marie Curie Cancer Care. Gillian currently lives in Glasgow with her husband and children.

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**Aim**

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that young people find helpful and unhelpful in the school-based counselling they have experienced, by synthesising responses from a number of studies.

**Introduction and background to the research**

**Concerns regarding young people's mental health and well-being**

A growing number of young people in the UK are experiencing mental health concerns. The Office for National Statistics [1] reported that 10% of 5–16 year olds in Great Britain have a clinically diagnosable mental health disorder. This rises to 12% among 11–16 year olds, with 5% having an emotional disorder such as anxiety or depression. Similarly, the Scottish Needs Assessment Programme (SNAP) Report [2] stated that approximately 10% of Scotland's young people have mental health problems which cause them difficulties on a daily basis.

In Northern Ireland, Connolly et al. [3] reported that at least 10% of young people have a moderate to severe mental health disorder, and 7–18% of children aged 10–11 years old reported feelings of loneliness and sadness. A recent survey in a Scottish secondary school identified 25% of 11–12 year olds with varying degrees of mental health difficulties [4].

Evidence shows that a child or young person's mental health difficulties can continue into adulthood. Kim-Cohen et al. [5] found that over half of adults with mental health problems first experienced symptoms in childhood or adolescence.

**School-based support**

These concerns have led to a focus on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, with a number of policies being introduced across the UK: e.g. the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services [6], and the Scottish Government’s Framework for Promotion, Prevention and Care (FPPC) [7]. The SNAP Report [2] suggested that the promotion of mental health should be the foundation of work with children and young people, and refers not only to mental health problems but also to the concept of wellbeing. Whole school approaches have been introduced to support health and wellbeing e.g. Health Promoting Schools [8] and Curriculum for Excellence [9]. Programmes such as Bounce Back [10] and SEAL [11] also promote mental health and resilience in schools.

The need for mental health services to be more accessible to young people has been highlighted [7]. Studies have found, for instance, that the majority of students express a preference for seeing a counsellor within their school [12,13]. Cooper [14] states that school-based counselling is now one of the most prominent forms of psychological therapy for young people in the UK. He suggests that its key strength is the accessibility of the service, enabling young people to talk to an independent professional when they are experiencing difficulties.

**Need for review of young people's experiences**

To date, most research on school-based counselling has been on the quantitative outcomes of evaluation studies [14,15]. Although some recent studies have included young people's views on the essential elements of school-counselling services (e.g. Campbell et al. [16]; Pattison et al. [17]), Harris and Pattison's [18] scoping review reported that few studies include young clients’ actual experiences of therapy. Given the current policy emphasis on service user participation [14], the collection and analysis of such data would seem essential in improving and developing counselling services for children and young people.

What service user data there is suggests that young people who have experienced counselling do rate it as helpful [15,19,20]. In addition, studies that have looked at which factors young people consider helpful in school-based counselling have found that young people value having someone to talk to [15,20,21]; and the counsellor being accepting, non-judgemental and supportive [20]. They also show that young people value the confidential nature of school-based counselling [15,21] and the ease of access [15].

Most of this research into young people's experience of school-based counselling has focused on single counselling services. However, Cooper [19] carried out an extensive review of the qualitative and quantitative literature on school-based counselling research in the UK which included helpful and unhelpful factors. The most helpful aspect of counselling for young people was found to be the opportunity to talk and be listened to. Other helpful factors reported by young people included getting things off their chest; problem-solving; guidance (suggestion and advice); insight; confidentiality; independence of counsellor; being understood; being accepted; and personal qualities of the counsellor. Cooper [19] found few responses regarding unhelpful factors but those that young people did mention included availability of counsellors; wanting counsellors to be more active; promotion of service; maintaining privacy; and the difficulty of the process.

This current review focuses on qualitative research to determine the factors that young people experience as helpful and unhelpful in school-based counselling. The aim was to expand upon, and update, the findings from Cooper's [19] review. A thorough systematic search and a formal qualitative meta-analysis of the data were also carried out.
Method of searching, selection and analysis

Inclusion criteria

Only those studies meeting the following inclusion criteria were eligible for this systematic review:

- **Age range and setting:** Involving young people of 11–18 years of age. Only those studies conducted with secondary school pupils were included. Any studies involving primary schools or tertiary education were excluded. Also excluded were any studies involving counselling with young people outside the school setting e.g. community based.

- **Type of counselling:** This review focuses on studies of one-to-one counselling, involving a therapist and young person. Any studies involving groups, peer counselling or classroom counselling were excluded; as were any studies involving telephone or online counselling. The young people involved in the studies were clients or ex-clients of the counselling service, not the general school population.

- **Recent studies:** Studies carried out within fifteen years of the search (from 1998–2013), were included in this review. Prior studies were excluded due to the changes that have occurred in schools and in school-based counselling since the 1990s.

- **Primary research:** Only primary research was included. However any review found during the search process was read for possible background information, and the references checked for studies that could meet the criteria for this review.

- **Data collection and analysis:** The data included in the studies must have been collected and analysed in a thorough manner e.g. thematic analysis of qualitative data.

If an abstract met the inclusion criteria, or if there was any doubt, the full article was read in detail to confirm that it met all the criteria.

Database search strategy

Electronic database searches were conducted using PsycINFO, Web of Knowledge, EBSCO Host and Google Scholar. Each database required a slightly different approach to the search, details of which can be found in Appendix 2. Keyword searches were carried out based on four main components of the search string:

- counselling, counseling
- school, secondar*, high, adolescen*, you*
- help*, significan*, experienc*
- research, audit, evaluat*

(* symbolises variations of the keyword)

The keywords within each of the components were combined with the Boolean operator ‘OR’. The four components were then combined by using the Boolean operator ‘AND’.

Limiter were applied to focus the results and to reduce the number of irrelevant studies being highlighted. The limiters were slightly different for each database (see Appendix 2) but in general these included the following:

- **Date:** to limit results to papers published in the last 15 years (1998–2013).
- **Language:** to limit results to papers written in English.
- **Age of participants:** where available this was used to exclude papers with adult participants.

Overall 2,172 results were obtained through the initial database searches (see Figure 1). Titles and abstracts were read and 19 were deemed potentially relevant. These full papers were sourced and the inclusion criteria were applied. Only two papers from the electronic search were found to include helpful factors from the young person’s perspective, and to meet all of the inclusion criteria.

Reference lists from related research were also searched and a hand search was conducted of BACP Children and Young People journals from December 2008–March 2013. No relevant papers were found.

Grey literature search strategy

Because of the potential amount of grey literature (e.g. evaluation documents, online reports) available, it was decided to focus exclusively on grey literature from the UK.

Initial requests for papers were made through the BACP Children and Young People journal, the Children and Young People Practice Research Network (CYP PRN) discussion board, plus the research section of the [www.therapytoday.net](http://www.therapytoday.net) noticeboard.

In addition to this, a web-based search was carried out to find counselling services across the UK. Their websites were scanned for relevant papers and they were contacted via email to ask if they had carried out, or knew of, research which may be relevant to this review (see Appendix 3 for a list of the services contacted). Further papers were sourced through personal communication with Karen Cromarty (BACP), Mick Cooper and Katherine McArthur (University of Strathclyde).

From these requests 59 papers were received (see Figure 1). In total seven papers found through this search strategy met the inclusion criteria and were also taken through to the next stage, along with those obtained from the database searches, giving a total of nine primary studies (see Table 1).
Data analysis

A qualitative meta-analysis [22] was conducted in which all relevant information was identified and extracted from the nine selected studies. The methodological design of each study was examined and an evaluation was made as to how the design may have influenced the results (see Appendix 4).

In analysing the data, a descriptive-interpretive approach [23] to categorisation was followed. Each original category of helpful and unhelpful factors from the primary studies were considered as separate meaning units. The meaning units were compared across studies and commonalities explored. Similar meaning units were gathered into clusters which generated the meta-categories for this review (shown in Tables 2 and 3).
### Table 1: Studies included in qualitative meta-analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Data analysis method</th>
<th>Helpful factors (% of clients who made responses)</th>
<th>Unhelpful factors (% of clients who made responses)</th>
<th>Factors influencing results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooper (I) [24]</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interviews were recorded, transcribed, analysed, then data was organised into categories with the help of NVivo (a qualitative analysis software package).</td>
<td>(a) What the counsellor had done that was helpful:</td>
<td>'nothing unhelpful' (58%)</td>
<td>In addition to the questionnaire, in-depth structured interviews were carried out with a small group of clients (19) who had completed counselling. Part of the interview focused on the counselling process and asked specifically what the client found helpful/unhelpful.</td>
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<td>'listening' (58%)</td>
<td>'lack of input or direction from the counsellor' (16%)</td>
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<td>'offers suggestions and advice' (58%)</td>
<td>'a desire for longer sessions'</td>
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<td>'counsellor nice and friendly' (53%)</td>
<td>'a desire for more sessions'</td>
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<td>'questions' (53%)</td>
<td>'counsellor was too serious'</td>
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<td>'expresses understanding' (32%)</td>
<td>'dislike of missing classes'</td>
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<td>'doesn’t criticise or judge' (26%)</td>
<td>'teachers were insufficiently discrete'</td>
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<td>'doesn’t direct' (26%)</td>
<td>'room was too publicly visible'</td>
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<td>'doesn’t try to sort things out' (26%)</td>
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<td>'relaxation techniques' (26%)</td>
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<td>'insights into their psychological processes and feelings' (16%)</td>
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<td>'reassurances' (16%)</td>
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<td>'counsellor a good listener' (16%)</td>
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<td>would not make it ‘all about them’ (11%)</td>
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<td>(b) What the client had done that was helpful:</td>
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<td>'opportunity to talk' (95%)</td>
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<td>'reflecting' (47%)</td>
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<td>'explores alternative ways of behaving' (47%)</td>
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<td>'opportunity to get things off their chest' (42%)</td>
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<td>'find answers for themselves' (16%)</td>
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<td>'be honest about what you were feeling' (11%)</td>
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<td>(c) Experience of counselling:</td>
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<td>'confidential' (83%)</td>
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<td>'relaxing' (26%)</td>
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### Study Data

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Cooper (Q)</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Qualitative items analysed and coded into categories.</td>
<td>‘talking and being listened to’ (28%) ‘specific improvements’ (24%) ‘getting things off one’s chest’ (16%) ‘self-esteem’ (8%) ‘guidance and advice’ (8%) ‘confidentiality’ (8%) ‘problem-solving’ (6%) ‘feeling understood’ (6%) ‘insight and awareness’ (5%)</td>
<td>2 respondents mentioned: ‘not as confidential as it should have been’ ‘more input from the counsellor’ Single responses: ‘more upset thinking about the past’ ‘don’t think I was ready to talk’ ‘too stubborn to pay attention’ ‘it did not help’ Improvements to service: ‘counsellor should be available for longer periods of time’ (3%) ‘service should be better publicised’ (3%) ‘proposed different formats or strategies’ (2%)</td>
<td>Response rate of 69% (117 pupils who completed counselling). 97 (83% of respondents) answered the question of how counselling was useful to them. 7 (6%) answered why counselling was not helpful. 24 (21%) responded to the request for comments regarding improvements to the service.</td>
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<td>Cooper [25]</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Qualitative outcomes coded into categories.</td>
<td>‘talking and being listened to’ (59%) ‘guidance and advice’ (14%) ‘miscellaneous’ (9%) ‘confidentiality’ (8%) ‘specific improvement’ (6%) ‘everything’ (6%)</td>
<td>‘nothing’ (91%). Single respondents mentioned: ‘constant changing of appointment days and times’ ‘counsellor should be there at the school all the time’ ‘there are still many pupils in the school who are unaware of how to go about getting help from the counselling service’</td>
<td>78% of clients who had completed therapy (90 pupils) returned questionnaires, which is an excellent response rate. 66 (73% of respondents) gave qualitative responses to the question asking what aspects of counselling they found useful. 34 (38%) gave responses to the question regarding unhelpful elements.</td>
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<td>Cooper [26]</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Qualitative responses were thematically analysed.</td>
<td>'opportunity to talk and be listened to' (44%) 'getting things off one’s chest' (8%) 'independence of counsellor' (7%) 'felt understood' (3%) 'having someone there' (3%) 'confidentiality' (2%) 'insight' (2%) 'useful guidance/advice' (2%) Clients also mentioned: 'counsellor’s acceptance' (2 respondents) 'self-directed process' (single response)</td>
<td>'not helpful' (4%) 'would like more counselling' (2 respondents) Improvements: 2 responses – 'counsellor should be more pro-active' Single responses - 'more frequent and/or longer session' 'more private location' 'room should be a lot more cheerier and brighter' 'service should be promoted more' 'should be able to do stuff that does not just involve talking' 'hot drinks should be provided'</td>
<td>Very high response rate (80%) and large number of clients (264) completed post-counselling questionnaires. 129 participants (49% of questionnaire respondents) answered the questions of why they thought counselling had helped or how the service may be improved. No question specifically regarding unhelpful factors.</td>
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| Dunne, Thompson & Leitch [27] | Questionnaire and interview (results were combined) | Qualitative comments from the questionnaires and interviews were coded and categorised. | (a) Client factors:  
‘talked about problems’ (64%)  
‘talked about feelings’ (55%)  
‘ease of talking’ (45%)  
‘experienced positive feeling’ (45%)  
‘was understood’ (36%)  
‘release of tension’ (36%)  
‘new perspective’ (36%)  
‘problem solving’ (36%)  
‘clarified ideas/problems’ (27%)  
‘focused/stayed focused’ (27%)  | Clients mentioned (2 respondents for each):  
‘experienced uncomfortable feelings’  
‘unwanted thoughts’  
‘client unable/unwilling to focus’  | Small number of participants (11), approximately half of the counsellor’s clients.  
These clients were chosen by the counsellor/researcher and invited to participate.  
Helpful/unhelpful factors measured after each session, rather than post-therapy.  
One item on the questionnaire asked specifically about helpful/unhelpful factors. Interviewees were further questioned about these factors. |
| | | | (b) Counsellor factors:  
‘encouraged client to talk’ (36%)  
‘listened to client’ (27%)  
‘summarised client material’ (27%)  | | |
| | | | (c) Contextual factors:  
‘counselling is different to other conversations: I can let things out’ (27%)  
Clients also mentioned (2 respondents):  
‘felt comforted/reassured’  
‘sense of being “real” as a person’  
‘lack of negative feelings/experiences in session’  
‘got useful information’  
‘achieved outside perspective/distance’  
‘revealed difficult material’  
‘counsellor asking questions’  
‘dealt with client resistance’  
‘objective: talk to someone that wasn’t taking any sides’ | |
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| Freire & Cooper [28]  | Questionnaire   | Qualitative responses were coded into categories. | ‘talking and listening’ (28%)  
‘things off chest’ (5%)  
‘counsellor ‘independent’ (5%)  
‘insight and self-understanding’ (3%)  
‘counsellor’s personal qualities’ (3%)  
‘advice’ (2%)  
‘understanding’ (2%)  
‘confidentiality’ (2%)  
‘acceptance’ (2%)  
‘problem solving’ (2 respondents) | No data included. | 292 end of therapy questionnaires, a response rate of 63%. (381 in total when end of term questionnaires are included). A high number of respondents, 268 (70.3% of those who completed the questionnaire) responded to the question of why they thought the counselling service was helpful/unhelpful. |
| Hough & Freire [29]   | Questionnaire   | Ranking of the seven items contained in the structured question. Qualitative responses sorted into categories. | Structured responses (% approx.):  
‘talking to someone who would listen’ (70%)  
‘being able to talk in a confidential environment’ (58%)  
‘getting things off chest’ (52%)  
‘receiving suggestions/advice’ (35%)  
‘being asked questions’ (31%)  
‘finding out why you think, feel and behave in the way you do’ (29%)  
‘working out new, and better, ways to behave’ (25%) | Qualitative responses:  
‘nothing to talk about/shy’ (7%)  
‘wanted more sessions’ (4%)  
‘wanted more advice/questions’ (4%)  
**single respondents also mentioned:**  
‘too many questions’  
‘counsellor tense’  
‘counselling did not help’ | Post-counselling questionnaires completed by 224 pupils (73.2% of clients, which is an excellent response rate). However only 93 of those who completed the questionnaire (31.4%) gave a qualitative response to the questions of why counselling was helpful/not helpful. The structured section of the questionnaire (containing suggestions of helpful factors) may have influenced the subsequent qualitative responses given. The structured responses are included here for information only, they are not included in the meta-analysis. |
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</table>
| Lynass, Pykhtina & Cooper [30] | Interview       | Qualitative responses were thematically analysed. | ‘talking/getting things out’ (82%)  
‘counsellor qualities’ (64%)  
‘can talk about things can’t talk to family/friends about’ (55%)  
‘other people helped alongside counselling’ (55%)  
‘feeling listened to/understood’ (55%)  
‘confidential/private’ (55%)  
‘being treated as an equal/not being told what to do’ (45%)  
‘trusted counsellor’ (36%)  
‘counsellor feedback/different perspective’ (36%)  
‘looking at ways to change’ (36%)  
‘atmosphere/room’ (36%)  
‘things about self that helped make use of counselling’ (36%) | ‘things that didn’t change although wanted them to’ (40%)  
‘more sessions/longer sessions wanted’ (30%)  
‘missing lessons’ (20%)  
‘not enough questions/advice’ (20%)  
‘no changes perceived’ (20%) | Small number of participants interviewed (11).  
Interviews included specific questions asking for examples of helpful/unhelpful factors.  
This study was part of a larger randomised controlled trial, so all interviewees received a similar counselling intervention. |
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| McArthur [31] | Interview      | Meaning units were transcribed from the interviews, then organised into categories. | (a) Counsellor-related:  
  - ‘counsellor’s personal qualities’ (57%)  
  - ‘counsellor’s independence (from school/client’s life)’ (43%)  
  - ‘counsellor listening’ (43%)  
  - ‘counsellor-led activities’ (36%)  
  - ‘counsellor advice’ (36%)  
  - ‘counsellor talking’ (29%)  
  - ‘counsellor understanding’ (21%)  

(b) Client-related:  
  - ‘talking about emotions (general)’ (93%)  
  - ‘talking about specific emotions or subjects’ (36%)  

(c) Relational:  
  - ‘comfort/ease in relating’ (57%)  
  - ‘dialogue’ (43%)  
  - ‘liking/closeness’ (36%)  
  - ‘trust’ (29%)  

(d) Practical:  
  - ‘confidentiality’ (36%)  
  - ‘timing of sessions’ (29%)  
  - ‘school context’ (21%)  

Clients also mentioned (1 or 2 respondents):  
  - ‘counsellor asking questions’  
  - ‘client thinking’  
  - ‘number of sessions’  

(a) Counsellor-related:  
  1 or 2 respondents wanted –  
  - ‘counsellor to talk more’  
  - ‘counsellor to ask more questions’  
  - ‘more advice’  
  - ‘more activities’  

(b) Client-related:  
  - ‘difficulty talking’ (29%)  

(c) Relational:  
  - ‘awkwardness’ (21%)  

(d) Practical:  
  - ‘miscellaneous practical issues’ (21%)  

1 or 2 respondents wanted –  
  - ‘more counselling’  
  - ‘less frequent sessions’  

Small number of participants interviewed (14).  
Interviews included specific questions on helpful and hindering factors, as well as general comments.  
Analysis of qualitative data collected during a randomised controlled trial of school-based humanistic counselling.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Data analysis method</th>
<th>Helpful factors (% of clients who made responses)</th>
<th>Unhelpful factors (% of clients who made responses)</th>
<th>Factors influencing results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Sherry (Q) [32] | Questionnaire | Thematic sorting of comments. | ‘talking more openly’ (24%)  
‘general comments’ (24%)  
‘being understood’ (12%)  
‘help with problems’ (12%)  
‘counsellor as friend’ (7%)  
‘confidentiality’ (7%)  
‘independence of the counsellor’ (5%)  
Clients also mentioned:  
‘not being judged’  
‘positive references to counsellors’ | ‘negative responses to the counsellor’ (30%)  
‘gender issues’ (13%)  
‘limitations of counselling’ (13%)  
‘feeling bad/worse during counselling’ (13%)  
Clients also mentioned:  
‘school environment’  
‘differences between counsellors’  
‘mismatch with the counsellor’  
‘counselling not being the decisive factor’  
‘nothing changes’  
‘fitting in with school’  
‘inability to talk’  
‘breaking confidentiality’  
‘ineffective nature of counselling’  
‘distress in the sessions’ | Questionnaires returned by 38% of service users (although not a high response rate, this consisted of 173 individuals).  
In response to an open question regarding experience of counselling, 41 (24% of respondents) mentioned helpful factors, 30 gave neutral or negative comments (17%). However this invitation followed structured questions which may have influenced the results.  
An open invitation to add comments resulted in 47 further responses, some of which referred to helpful or unhelpful factors. |
| Sherry (I) [32] | Interview | General sorting of comments e.g. positive, neutral/mixed, negative. | expressing self  
able to speak own mind  
someone to talk to  
someone to listen  
stuff off my chest  
confidential | too many questions  
brings up stuff don’t want to talk about  
treated too young  
change of counsellor  
school limitations e.g. coming out of lessons  
longer sessions  
more privacy  
holiday cover needed | Semi-structured 15-minute individual interviews were conducted with self-nominated individuals (54 pupils) a sub-group of those who returned questionnaires.  
No information regarding interview questions included. |
Findings

Meta-categories of helpful factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Having an opportunity to talk openly and be listened to (n=26)</th>
<th>Counsellors’ strategies and guidance (n=19)</th>
<th>Getting things off one’s chest and releasing tension (n=12)</th>
<th>Counsellors’ personal qualities (n=12)</th>
<th>Problem solving (n=11)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Opportunity to talk’ [24 I]</td>
<td>‘Offers suggestions and advice’ [24 I]</td>
<td>‘Counselling is different to other conversations: I can let things out’ [27]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor nice and friendly’ [24 I]</td>
<td>‘Find answers for themselves’ [24 I]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Talked about problems’ [27]</td>
<td>‘Summarised client material’ [27]</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Positive references to counsellors’ [Q 32]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Across the nine studies included in this review, 143 categories of helpful factors were identified in the primary data. From the analysis of these, 12 meta-categories were formulated (see Table 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Having an opportunity to talk openly and be listened to (continued)</th>
<th>Counsellors’ strategies and guidance (continued)</th>
<th>Confidentiality (n=10)</th>
<th>Independence of counsellor (n=9)</th>
<th>Additional helpful factors (n=18)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Encouraged client to talk’ [27]</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Confidential/private’ [30]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ease of talking’ [27]</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Confidential/private’ [30]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone to talk to [I 32]</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Counsellor feedback/different perspective’ [30]</td>
<td>‘Specific improvements’ [Q 24,25]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone to listen [I 32]</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘New perspective’ [27]</td>
<td>‘Timing of sessions’ [31]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Be honest about what you were feeling’ [I 24]</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Objective: talk to someone that wasn’t taking any sides’ [27]</td>
<td>‘Number of sessions’ [31]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to speak own mind [I 32]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘School context’ [31]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Revealed difficult material’ [27]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Having time out’ [29]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Sense of being “real” as a person’ [27]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Focused/stayed focused’ [27]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling understood (n=9)</td>
<td>Feeling accepted and not judged (n=6)</td>
<td>Insight and self-awareness (n=6)</td>
<td>Self-directed process (n=5)</td>
<td>Additional helpful factors (continued)</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Was understood' [27]</td>
<td>'Not being judged' [Q 32]</td>
<td>Client ‘reflecting’ [I 24]</td>
<td>'Counsellor doesn’t try to sort things out' [I 24]</td>
<td>Counsellor would not make it ‘all about them’ [24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Counsellor understanding' [31]</td>
<td>'Non-judgemental' [25]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>'Understanding' [28]</td>
<td>'Counsellor doesn’t criticise or judge' [I 24]</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Counsellor expresses understanding' [I 24]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = number of categories found across studies*
Having an opportunity to talk openly and be listened to. A total of 26 categories, found across all of the nine studies, contributed to this meta-category. Some of the studies combined talking and listening, whereas others reported these separately. However what is clear is that the majority of young people identify this factor as being far the most helpful in their experience of counselling, with it coming out as most frequent in all nine studies.

Clients valued being offered the opportunity to talk and be listened to [24–26,28,29]. The talking aspect of this meta-category was described in a number of ways, with clients finding it helpful talking ‘about problems’ and ‘about feelings’, and ‘ease of talking’ [27]; ‘talking about emotions (general)’ or ‘talking about specific emotions or subjects’ [31]; ‘talking/getting things out’ [30]. The counsellor was viewed as ‘someone to talk to’ [32], and someone who ‘encouraged client to talk’ [27].

Responses in some of the studies included the concept of openness in this talking e.g. ‘talking more openly’, ‘expressing self’ and ‘able to speak own mind’ [32]; ‘be honest about what you were feeling’ [24]; ‘sense of being “real” as a person’ [27]; ‘revealed difficult material’ [27].

The listening aspect of this meta-category was separately described as ‘feeling listened to/understood’ [30]; ‘someone to listen’ [32]; ‘counsellor listening’ [24,31]; ‘listened to client’ [27].

Although not included in these results it is interesting to note that in the structured question of Hough and Freire’s [29] evaluation, ‘talking to someone who would listen’ was also ranked first, with 70% of clients answering ‘a lot’ to how helpful they regarded this factor.

Counsellors’ strategies and guidance. Nineteen categories found across seven of the studies show that young people described a number of active strategies adopted by counsellors as being helpful. ‘Guidance’, ‘advice’ or ‘suggestions’ were mentioned to varying degrees in six of the studies [24–26,28,29,31].

The ‘counsellor asking questions’ was viewed as helpful by some [24,27,31]. The ‘counsellor talking’ [31], giving ‘useful information’ [27] or ‘reassurances’ [24] were identified as helpful factors. How the counsellor ‘dealt with client resistance’ and ‘summarised client material’ were also noted in Dunne et al.’s [27] study.

Specific strategies such as counsellor-led activities [31] and relaxation techniques [24] were identified. It is not clear if these activities were provided in the other studies as most were described as broadly humanistic or person-centred. However it is curious to note that although predominantly person-centred, Cooper’s [26] evaluation did include other elements e.g. relaxation methods and the use of art and play materials, but these are not mentioned by clients as helpful (or unhelpful).
Getting things off one’s chest and releasing tension.
This factor was mentioned in 12 categories across seven of the studies but to varying degrees of importance. In Hough and Freire [29] study, for instance, ‘get things off chest’ was ranked third in the structured question regarding how helpful each factor was, with 52% of respondents answering ‘a lot’. However in the qualitative responses in the same study only 7% of clients mentioned this.

In Cooper’s [24] evaluation ‘getting things off one’s chest’ was deemed important with 16% of respondents mentioning this in the questionnaire and 42% in the interview.

Although less frequent than the most popular response of talking and listening, ‘getting things off one’s chest’ was the second most reported factor in Cooper’s [26] study and in Freire and Cooper [28]. Getting ‘stuff’ or ‘things off one’s chest’ is also mentioned in Cooper [25] and in Sherry’s [32] interviews.

Dunne et al. [27] found that clients valued the nature of counselling as being different to other conversations, which enabled them to ‘let things out’. In this study ‘off my chest’ was also described as a release of tension. The helpful factor of ‘experiencing a positive feeling’ has been included in this category, as the feeling of release, letting things out or off the chest, are all experienced as positive feelings in these studies.

The two studies that are not mentioned in this category may have received similar responses but included these under other categories. For instance Lynass et al. [30] combined ‘getting things out’ with ‘talking’ in their study. As only some examples of each category are given and not the full data, it was not possible to separate these factors for this review so this was included under the previous category. This may be similar in McArthur’s [31] study where the idea of release may come through ‘talking about emotions’, but as the full data were not available this is unclear.

Counsellors’ personal qualities.
The counsellor’s personal qualities were reported as helpful in 12 categories across six of the studies. In some this was rated as very important [30,31] but to a lesser extent in others [28].

‘Liking/closeness’ was seen as important in McArthur’s [31] study, as was ‘comfort/ease in relating’. The counsellor being ‘nice’ and ‘friendly’ was identified as being helpful in three of the studies [24,29,32]. Trust was also valued as a helpful element in Lynass et al. [30] and in McArthur’s [31] study.

Problem solving.
Eleven categories, from seven studies, have been included in the meta-category of problem solving. Four studies specifically refer to ‘problem solving’ [24,25,27,28]. Sherry [32] reported that young people appreciated receiving ‘help with problems’. Other studies found that young people identified counselling as helpful in that it gave them a chance to ‘explore alternative ways of behaving’, allowing them to ‘find answers for themselves’ [24]; or as a helpful space where they could spent time ‘thinking’ [31] and ‘looking at ways to change’ [30].

Confidentiality.
Only 10 categories were found referring to confidentiality, but this was included in eight of the nine studies. In the smaller studies a higher percentage of respondents cited this factor e.g. 55% in Lynass et al. [30] referred to the ‘confidential/private’ nature of counselling as being helpful, and McArthur [31] where 36% of respondents referred to ‘confidentiality’. However the percentages of respondents were lower in the other studies, for instance in Cooper [26] and in Freire and Cooper [28] only 2% of respondents mentioned confidentiality.

Confidentiality is rated higher when it is specifically given to participants as a response option: for instance, in the interview question of Cooper’s [24] evaluation, where 63% stated that it was an important aspect of counselling. Also in the structured question in Hough and Freire [29] confidentiality was ranked second, with 58% of respondents answering ‘a lot’ to how helpful this factor is in counselling.

The only study where confidentiality was not mentioned (either as a helpful or unhelpful factor) is in Dunne et al. [27]. There were a small number of participants (n = 11) in this study and the researcher was also the counsellor, which may have affected results.

Confidentiality was not broken down in most studies as to who the counselling should be confidential from: that is, parents, teachers, other pupils, or in general. Cooper [24] did find that the importance of confidentiality was most notable with regard to other pupils. In this study three participants stated that they would have felt that a breach of confidentiality would have been a betrayal. This will be looked at in regard to unhelpful factors.

Independence of counsellor.
Nine categories across seven of the studies referred to factors which fitted into this meta-category. Some specifically mentioned the independence of the counsellor [25,26,28,31,32]. In Dunne et al.’s [27] study this independence was described as ‘someone that wasn’t taking any sides’. In Lynass et al. [30] talking to the counsellor was valued as the young people felt they could ‘talk about things can’t talk to family/friends about’. Some young people also valued having a ‘different’ or ‘new’ perspective on their situation [27,30].

Feeling understood.
Nine categories included the young person feeling understood or the counsellor being understanding. This was cited in all of the studies, although Lynass et al. [30] combined it with ‘listened to’ so it has been included in that meta-category.
The counsellor being ‘understanding’ was cited in Cooper’s [24] interviews and to a lesser extent in Freire and Cooper’s [28] study, as well as in responses to the open question in McArthur’s [31] study.

Being ‘understood’ was the third most identified helpful factor in Sherry’s [32] questionnaires. It was also cited in Cooper [25,26]; Dunne et al. [27]; and Hough and Freire’s [29] studies.

**Feeling accepted and not judged.**

Acceptance, or the counsellor being non-judgemental, was referred to in six categories across six studies. The ‘counsellor’s acceptance/not being judged’ was the second most mentioned qualitative response in Hough and Freire’s [29] evaluation. Acceptance was also mentioned in Cooper [26] and in Freire and Cooper [28].

‘Not being judged’ [32]; ‘counsellor doesn’t criticise or judge’ [24]; and the counsellor being ‘non-judgemental’ [25] were also found to be helpful factors.

**Insight and self-awareness.**

Six categories are included in this meta-category. Insight, self-understanding and awareness are often seen as outcomes of counselling, however five studies mentioned these factors as being helpful during the process of counselling [24,25,26,28,29]. Cooper [24] also reported that young people found ‘reflecting’ helpful.

**Self-directed process.**

Five categories relating to this meta-category were found across four of the studies. Some young people valued the counselling being a ‘self-directed process’ [26,29], and appreciated that the ‘counsellor doesn’t direct’ [24]. In the school environment which is often very controlled, young people found it helpful that in counselling they were ‘not being told what to do’ [30], and that the ‘counsellor doesn’t try to sort things out’ [24].

**Additional helpful factors.**

Eighteen categories from eight of the studies were included in the additional helpful factors meta-category. These factors were referred to in general terms in two studies: for instance, ‘miscellaneous’ or ‘everything’ in Cooper [25], or ‘general comments’ in Sherry [32]. Others were more specific: for instance, ‘atmosphere/room’ [30] or ‘having time out’ [29].

McArthur’s [31] study is particularly notable in this regard as it specifies factors such as ‘timing of sessions’, ‘school context’ and ‘number of sessions’. Interestingly these factors are also mentioned as unhelpful aspects.

**Meta-categories of unhelpful factors in school-based counselling**

Few participants cited unhelpful factors of school-based counselling. Although 75 categories of unhelpful factors were reported over the nine studies, some of these factors were only identified by single respondents. Even though there was a low response, it was possible to find some commonality across studies. From the 75 factors nine meta-categories were created (see Table 3).

**Difficulties with school environment or practicalities.**

Twelve categories across six of the studies reported unhelpful factors related to the school environment or other practicalities. Some studies referred to these in general terms (for instance, ‘miscellaneous practical issues’ [31]), whereas others were more specific (for instance, ‘room should be a lot more cheerful and brighter’ [26]).

In this respect, issues regarding the school context were identified as unhelpful as well as helpful. For instance Sherry [32] referred to the general ‘school environment’ and ‘fitting in with school’; but also ‘school limitations’ concerning ‘coming out of lessons’. This factor of ‘missing lessons’ was also cited as unhelpful in Cooper [24] and in Lynass et al. [30]. Some counselling services attempt to alter the times of sessions so that the same lessons are not missed. Perhaps related to this, although it is not made clear, is the ‘constant changing of appointment days and times’ [25] which is also described as being unhelpful.

Respondents made other suggestions for improvements which included pupils being able to ‘contact the counsellor directly’ [24]; ‘shorter waiting time’ [24]; and ‘holiday cover needed’ [32].

**Wanting more counselling.**

Eleven categories were found across seven studies referring to young people wanting more counselling. Although one respondent in McArthur’s [31] study mentioned the number of sessions as being helpful, more respondents identified the number or length of sessions as being unhelpful or in need of improvement. Young people wanted ‘more counselling’ [26,31]; and this concern was repeated across studies e.g. ‘more sessions’ [24,29]; ‘longer sessions’ [24,32]; ‘more frequent and/or longer sessions’ [26]; ‘more or longer sessions wanted’ [30]; ‘duration of sessions/needed longer or more’ [24].

Suggestions were made to improve this, for instance ‘counsellor should be at the school all the time’ [25]; ‘counsellor should be around more often’ or ‘available for longer periods of time’ [24].

**Found it difficult to talk.**

Finding it difficult to talk in sessions was seen as being unhelpful in the counselling process, as this was mentioned in 11 categories across five of the studies. Those unhelpful factors associated with talking were identified as clients having ‘difficulty talking’ [31]; ‘nothing to talk about/shy’ [29]; not ‘ready to talk’ [24]; ‘inability to talk’ [32]; or the counsellor ‘brings up stuff don’t want to talk about’ [32].

Some clients also found uncomfortable thoughts and feelings unhelpful e.g. ‘experienced uncomfortable feelings’...
### Table 3: Meta-categories of unhelpful factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties with school environment or practicalities (n=12)</th>
<th>Wanting more counselling (n=11)</th>
<th>Found it difficult to talk (n=11)</th>
<th>Wanting more counsellor input (n=8)</th>
<th>Counsellors’ personal factors (n=7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘School environment’ [Q 32]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor should be at the school all the time’ [25]</td>
<td>‘Don’t think I was ready to talk’ [Q 24]</td>
<td>‘Wanted more activities’ [31]</td>
<td>‘Negative responses to counsellor’ [Q 32]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Fitting in with school’ [Q 32]</td>
<td>‘A desire for longer sessions’ [I 24]</td>
<td>‘Difficulty talking’ [31]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor should be more proactive’ [26]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor was too serious’ [I 24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School limitations e.g. coming out of lessons [I 32]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor should be available for longer periods of time’ [Q 24]</td>
<td>‘Nothing to talk about/shy’ [29]</td>
<td>‘Lack of input or direction from the counsellor’ [24]</td>
<td>‘Gender issues’ [Q 32]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike of ‘missing lessons’ [I 24; 30]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor should be around more often’ [I 24]</td>
<td>‘Inability to talk’ [Q 32]</td>
<td>‘Wanted counsellor to ask more questions’ [31]</td>
<td>‘Differences between counsellors’ [Q 32]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Shorter waiting time’ [I 24]</td>
<td>‘Wanted more counselling’ [31]</td>
<td>Brings up stuff don’t want to talk about [I 32]</td>
<td>‘Wanted more advice/questions’ [29]</td>
<td>‘Mismatch with counsellor’ [Q 32]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Room should be a lot more cheerier and brighter’ [26]</td>
<td>‘More frequent and/or longer session’ [26]</td>
<td>‘More upset thinking about the past’ [Q 24]</td>
<td>‘Not enough questions/advice’ [30]</td>
<td>‘Counsellor tense’ [29]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Hot drinks should be provided’ [26]</td>
<td>‘More sessions/longer sessions wanted’ [30]</td>
<td>‘Experienced uncomfortable feelings’ [27]</td>
<td>‘Wanted counsellor to talk more’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Constant changing of appointment days and times’ [25]</td>
<td>Longer sessions [I 32]</td>
<td>‘Client unable/unwilling to focus’ [27]</td>
<td>‘More input from the counsellor’ [Q 24]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Miscellaneous practical issues’ [31]</td>
<td>‘A desire for more sessions’ [I 24]</td>
<td>‘Feeling bad/worse during counselling’ [Q 32]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Contact the counsellor directly’ [I 24]</td>
<td>‘Would like more counselling’ [26]</td>
<td>‘Distress in the sessions’ [Q 32]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No change/not helpful (n=7)</th>
<th>Not sufficiently confidential or private (n=6)</th>
<th>Pupils unaware of service (n=3)</th>
<th>Additional unhelpful factors (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Things that didn’t change although wanted them to’ [30]</td>
<td>‘Not as confidential as it should have been’ [Q 24]</td>
<td>‘There are still many pupils in the school who are unaware of how to go about getting help from the counselling service’ [25]</td>
<td>‘Proposed different formats or strategies’ [Q 24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘No changes perceived’ [30]</td>
<td>‘Breaking confidentiality’ [Q 32]</td>
<td>‘Service should be promoted more’ [26]</td>
<td>‘Should be able to do stuff that does not just involve talking’ [26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Nothing changes’ [32]</td>
<td>‘Teachers were insufficiently discrete’ [l 24]</td>
<td>‘Service should be better publicised’ [Q 24]</td>
<td>‘Too many questions’ [l 32, 29]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Not helpful’ [26]</td>
<td>‘Room was too publicly visible’ [24]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It did not help’ [Q 24]</td>
<td>‘More private location’ [26]</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Counselling did not help’ [29]</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = number of categories found across studies
Wanting more counsellor input.
Young people reported wanting more counsellor input in eight categories across five of the studies. This meta-category should be viewed in relation to the similar category within helpful factors. Some of the findings here support those, for instance advice and questioning were referred to as helpful and three studies have also found that clients stated they ‘wanted counsellor to ask more questions’ or ‘more advice’; ‘more advice/questions’ or that there were ‘not enough questions/advice’.

Some respondents also wanted more input generally from counsellors, or for counsellors to provide more active strategies e.g. ‘more input wanted from counsellor’, ‘lack of input or direction from the counsellor’; ‘counsellor should be more proactive’; ‘wanted counsellor to talk more’, ‘wanted more activities’.

Counsellors’ personal factors.
Most factors regarding counsellors’ personal qualities were reported as helpful; however three studies did include unhelpful aspects related to counsellors in seven categories. Most of these responses came from Sherry’s study in which some clients experienced a change of counsellor which may have affected the results. This study included unhelpful factors related to ‘negative responses to counsellor’, ‘change of counsellor’, ‘differences between counsellors’, ‘mismatch with counsellor’ and ‘gender issues’, although it should be noted that the number of responses were small e.g. only two clients. There is no information regarding the qualifications or experience of the counsellors to assess whether that may have been a factor in this study.

Other personal factors related to counsellors were reported by single respondents only in Cooper’s study as the ‘counsellor was too serious’ and in Hough and Freire’s study as the ‘counsellor tense’.

No change/not helpful.
Five studies included comments from participants in seven categories, who felt that counselling did not help or there were no changes e.g. ‘it did not help’; ‘not helpful’; ‘counselling did not help’; ‘nothing changes’ and ‘ineffective nature of counselling’; ‘no changes perceived’ and ‘things that didn’t change although wanted them to’.

This could be viewed more as an outcome factor rather than a factor in the therapy process, but it is not possible to determine this by the data supplied.

Not sufficiently confidential or private.
As previously mentioned, confidentiality was regarded as an important helpful factor in most of the studies contained in this review, and a breach of confidentiality was viewed as betrayal. A lack of confidentiality or privacy was reported as an unhelpful factor in six categories across three of the studies. In one study it was felt that the counselling was ‘not as confidential as it should have been’ and in another the counsellor sending a letter home was considered
‘breaking of confidentiality’ [32]. It was not only counsellors who were considered at fault regarding confidentiality, as ‘teachers were insufficiently discrete’ was mentioned in Cooper’s [24] interviews.

There were also concerns over the counselling room, where lack of privacy was considered unhelpful at times e.g. ‘room too publicly visible’ [24]; ‘more private location’ [26]; ‘more privacy’ [32].

Pupils unaware of service.
Respondents in three of the studies were concerned that other pupils may be unaware of the service, noting that many pupils are ‘unaware of how to go about getting help from the counselling service’ [26]. Young people made suggestions that the service should be ‘better publicised’ [24] or ‘promoted more’ [26].

Additional unhelpful factors.
Ten categories of various additional unhelpful factors were found across six of the studies. Interestingly these were sometimes at odds with the factors previously mentioned, for instance in regard to questioning which has been mentioned as a helpful factor and a lack of questioning as being unhelpful. However two of the studies [29,32] found that ‘too many questions’ were seen as unhelpful. Questioning therefore seems to be an individual preference with some clients wishing less than others.

Counsellors’ strategies also appear in this meta-category with some respondents wanting counsellors to use ‘different formats or strategies’ [24], or that they ‘should be able to do stuff that does not just involve talking’ [26]. Although only one respondent in Sherry [32] reported that they felt that they had been ‘treated too young’ by being offered toys and games, it is important to note that secondary school pupils may feel patronised by being asked to express themselves in this way.

Discussion
This synthesis of the evidence suggests that young people find many aspects of school-based counselling helpful, as practiced in a predominantly person-centred/humanistic way (see Appendix 4). For instance, they value the opportunity to talk openly and be listened to, to get things off their chest, and to feel understood and accepted without judgement. They appreciated counselling being a self-directed process and providing the opportunity for insight, self-awareness and problem solving. The counsellor’s personal qualities such as being nice, friendly and trustworthy were also experienced as helpful. It was seen as important that the counsellor was an independent person who provided a new perspective in a confidential setting.

However, more surprisingly, given the humanistic orientation of the counselling, young people also indicated that they valued the more active strategies that their counsellors use. For instance, person-centred/humanistic practitioners would not usually be expected to provide ‘advice’, but this was something that the young people specifically highlighted as helpful. In some instances, the lack of more active strategies was also seen as being unhelpful. This suggests...
that counsellors may be more effective with some young people if they adopt a more active stance in their work, and monitor closely whether young people may be perceiving them as too passive. It may also highlight the importance of the contracting stage of therapy: to be clear to young people as to what school-based counselling entails and to listen to what individuals are seeking, to continually review this throughout therapy and to adapt practice accordingly. This would seem especially pertinent where questioning is concerned as this appeared to be an individual preference, with some young people reporting questioning as helpful and others as unhelpful.

The most frequently cited helpful factor ‘having an opportunity to talk openly and be listened to’ was clearly the most important in the experience of young people. Dunne et al. [27] thought that the clients in their study may have valued the opportunity to talk more due to the cultural inhibitions of an all-boys school. However this review has shown this is not the case, as all of the other studies found the same result in mixed sex schools. In fact Hough and Freire [29] found that females rated ‘talking to someone who would listen’ and ‘getting things off chest’ as more helpful than males.

Although fewer participants mentioned negative experiences, this review was able to identify some unhelpful factors and areas for improvement. As already mentioned these tended to focus on practical matters, wanting more counselling or more counsellor input. However another factor that clients found difficult was feeling uncomfortable in sessions, especially regarding talking. This was also found in Hill et al. [15] and with adult clients in Timulak and Creaner [33]. Facing difficult emotions can be overwhelming but as Dunne et al. [27] suggest, it may be necessary in the therapeutic process. So although this is reported as an unhelpful factor it is not suggested that this be avoided, but that the therapist should be mindful of this difficulty and provide support when the client is feeling vulnerable.

Limitations

During the literature search many other evaluations of counselling services were identified. However, they could not be included in this review as, in some cases, only partial data was provided (for instance just a few examples of helpful factors), and in others, only un-coded data were available. Many had to be excluded as they did not meet the criterion regarding the data being analysed in a thorough manner. Harris and Pattison [18] also reported this limitation in their review where they found a lack of empirical evidence for counselling in school and community settings, especially regarding young people’s experiences. Although they discovered evidence of client satisfaction, they identified a lack of rigour in evaluations which excluded them from their review.

Paterson et al. [34] argue that one of the limitations of qualitative meta-analysis is the lack of access to the primary data of the selected studies, so the meta-analysis is based on the published findings rather than the original data. Indeed it was not possible to obtain the original data for all of the studies included in this review. Only two contained the full data [29,32], with most providing examples of comments under each category. However the available data were thoroughly examined to verify the meta-category that each helpful or unhelpful factor was assigned to.

Another limitation of studies which explore client views is the subjective nature of the data. Dunne et al. [27] point out there is an assumption that participants are capable and willing to respond accurately regarding their experiences, which may not always be the case. Cooper [24–26] suggests that those clients who participate in interviews or return questionnaires may be predisposed to respond positively. This may be one reason why more helpful factors were reported here than unhelpful factors. The percentage of respondents giving comments regarding helpful factors was high in some studies (e.g. 83% in Cooper [24]), with few unhelpful comments, sometimes from single respondents only.

Some steps were taken to reduce the chance that participants were responding positively to please their counsellors. For instance, most of the studies were carried out by independent researchers; with clients being told their responses would be confidential (an exception to this is Dunne et al. [27] which was carried out by a counsellor/researcher, so questionnaires were sealed to provide some level of confidentiality).

Cooper [24] suggests that those clients who are unsatisfied with the counselling they received are less likely to participate in evaluations. It may also be difficult to gather the views of those clients who withdraw from therapy. If future research could discover the factors which these young people find unhelpful, it may be possible to alter the therapeutic process to reduce dropout rates.

Implications for practice

By focusing on the views of young people it is hoped that this report will improve their experiences of school-based counselling, as practitioners will be able to prioritise the factors that young people rate as most important. This could lead to more effective services, which are responsive to client needs. The helpful factors reported in this review may be useful for counsellors when considering their practice, while the unhelpful factors may identify areas in need of improvement. It is possible for instance, that some of the practical issues connected to providing a counselling service within a school setting may be easily rectified.

Confidentiality is valued by young people, and lack of confidentiality is viewed as unhelpful. Complete confidentiality is not possible and this should be explained clearly to clients, for example regarding child protection issues [35], however certain steps could be taken to
improve matters. For instance, care should be taken over the private location of the counselling room, and the confidentiality of appointments. Instead of notes being passed in class regarding appointment times [32], more contemporary means of communication e.g. contact via a webpage or school intranet, or appointment times sent via text [36] could solve this problem. Counsellors may need to be flexible regarding timing of sessions, arranging these at different times so that pupils do not miss the same lessons repeatedly, or provide sessions during lunchtime or after school.

Another practical issue highlighted by young people is lack of awareness of services and they suggest that services should be better promoted. In primary schools, counsellors often attend assemblies and visit classes, but this may prove more difficult in larger secondary schools. However, with health and wellbeing now being part of the curriculum, it may be possible for counsellors to become more prominent: for instance, through PSE (Personal and Social Education) classes.

A factor that may not be so easy to resolve is that of counsellor availability, as this often depends on the funding of the service. Many young people reported ‘wanting more counselling’ so it appears that the number or length of sessions is inadequate for their needs. This dissatisfaction has been repeated in other reports [16,17,19] and suggests that extended funding may be required for school-based services.

With the growth of UK school-based counselling it is increasingly important for services to be evaluated thoroughly and findings to be disseminated. If future studies included clear protocols (as in Cooper’s studies [24–26]), they could be easily replicated across other services. Research should not only focus on the effectiveness of services but also consider young people’s views. Current initiatives such as Counselling MindEd, and development of competencies and accreditation for counsellors working with young people [14], should continue to improve the practice of school-based counselling.

**Conclusion**

Previous research has shown the effectiveness of school-based counselling (e.g. Hill et al. [15]); and that the majority of young people find it helpful (e.g. 88% in Hough & Freire [29]). The qualitative research included in this review examines how young people experience counselling and what they find helpful and unhelpful in the process.

A thorough literature search was carried out and nine studies were found to fit the criteria for inclusion. A qualitative meta-analysis was conducted to synthesise the findings from these primary studies. This provided a coherent picture of young people’s experiences of school-based counselling.

The main finding of this systematic review is that young people in counselling most value the opportunity to talk openly and be listened to. Other factors also seen as important are the chance to get things off their chest, to feel understood, accepted and not judged. Young people value counselling being a self-directed process, providing an opportunity for insight, self-awareness and problem solving. The counsellor’s independence and personal qualities, as well as the confidentiality of counselling are all considered helpful. In addition, counsellor strategies such as guidance and advice are viewed as helpful, and lack of counsellor input is sometimes regarded as unhelpful. These findings support Cooper’s [24,26] proposal that school-based counsellors working within a broadly humanistic framework, may be most helpful when adopting a flexible, ‘pluralistic’ approach [37] to meet the individual needs of young people and incorporate strategies when required.

Although the reporting of unhelpful factors was found to be low, there are a number of issues which would be useful to consider when developing a counselling service. These include practical issues such as missing lessons, wanting more counselling as well as more counsellor input, confidentiality, pupils being unaware of the service, and finding it difficult to talk.

There is a need for further rigorous research to be carried out in this area and for findings to be disseminated. Young people’s voices should be heard and specific questions regarding their experiences should be asked.

It is hoped that this systematic review will contribute to a clearer understanding of the process of counselling from the young person’s perspective, and that by taking account of clients’ views this may lead to more effective practice.

**References**

References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the qualitative meta-analysis.


24. *Cooper, M., Counselling in schools project: Evaluation report, 2004, Counselling Unit, University of Strathclyde: Glasgow.


26. *Cooper, M., Counselling in schools project phase 2: Evaluation report, 2006, Counselling Unit, University of Strathclyde: Glasgow.


Appendices

Appendix 1 - Definitions of key terms

Counselling: In this review counselling is defined as one-to-one therapy involving a trained practitioner who is working with a young person to ‘help them bring about effective change or enhance their wellbeing.’ [38].

School-based counselling: In the UK the term school-based counselling is preferred to ‘school counselling’ [14] and refers to counselling which is situated within a school building; not at an external location e.g. health establishment. This therapy is not necessarily centred on school-related issues. Most UK school-based counsellors associate with relational forms of therapy e.g. person-centred/humanistic approaches [14].

Young people: For the purposes of this review ‘young people’ refers only to those who are in secondary education and are of ages 11 to 18 years.

Experiences: The young people’s perspectives or subjective views of the counselling sessions they participated in.

Helpful and unhelpful factors: Reasons young people give for finding counselling helpful or unhelpful (or how they think the counselling experience could be improved). Only those factors related to the therapy process, not the outcome, are included in this review.

Appendix 2 - Search strategies

Search terms for all databases.
- (counselling OR counseling)
- AND
- (school OR secondar* OR high OR adolescen* OR youth)
- AND
- (help* OR significan* OR experienc*)
- AND
- (research OR audit OR evaluat*)

* symbolises variations of the keywords.

PsycINFO – advanced search.
Search terms used in title and abstract.

Limiters:
- Publication date: start 1998 end 2013
- Record type: dissertation, journal, journal article, peer reviewed journal
- Language: English
- Age Group: School age (6–12 years) and Adolescence (13–17 years)
- Population: Human

Web of Knowledge – advanced search.
Search terms used in topic.

Limiters:
- Timespan: From 1998 to 2013
- Search Language: English
- Research Domains – social sciences, arts humanities
- Research Areas – psychology, education – educational research, sociology, social sciences – other topics, social issues.
- Document type: article
EBSCO Host – advanced search.
Search terms used in title and abstract.

Limiters:
Publication date: 1998–2013
Source types: academic journals
Subject: counseling, educational counseling, counselor and client, qualitative research, counseling psychology, counseling – research, students – attitudes

Google Scholar – general search.
Search terms used in general search.

As Google Scholar has few opportunities to limit a search, the first 1,000 results sorted by relevance, were searched (from a total of 555,000).

Limiters:
Time: 1998–2013
Search English papers: articles

Appendix 3 - List of organisations

Organisations whose websites were searched and who were contacted requesting ‘grey literature’. All searches were conducted from March to May 2013.

2as1
ACIS Youth Counselling

Cabrini Children’s Society
Catholic Children’s Society
Clear Minds
Communication Now Ltd.
Conscire
Counselling in Schools
Dialogue
Dudley LEA Counselling Service
East Renfrewshire Youth Counselling Service (ERYCS)
Entrust
Independent Counselling Service for Schools
Lifelink
NSPCC
Place2Be
Reach Out Counselling in Schools
Relate
School and Family Support Service (Angus)
The Bridge Foundation
The Children’s Law Centre in Belfast
The Institute for Conflict Research in Northern Ireland
The Wellbeing Sanctuary
Time 4 Me
Time 4 You
Together in Communication
Valley Trust
WHCM Counselling
Wigan Family Welfare
Youth Access
## Appendix 4: Further details of the studies included in the qualitative meta-analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bibliographic details</th>
<th>Therapy type</th>
<th>Details of respondents</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Key findings relevant to this review</th>
<th>Evaluation of paper</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author:</strong> Sherry, J.</td>
<td>Broadly humanistic</td>
<td>Pupils from 16 secondary schools in Dudley</td>
<td>An evaluation of the counselling service provided in Dudley secondary schools – to summarise the views and experiences of pupils who have made use of the counselling service, and to identify some of the potential issues for service development.</td>
<td>A questionnaire was distributed to past and existing service users. A sub-group of those who returned questionnaires were individually interviewed (this sub-group were self-nominated individuals). Interviews were semi-structured and lasted for approximately 15 minutes. Qualitative responses from the questionnaires were arranged in general groupings and were further sorted into themes. Qualitative responses from the interviews regarding helpful and unhelpful factors were only arranged in general groupings of positive, neutral/mixed, negative.</td>
<td>The main <strong>helpful factors</strong> reported were the opportunity to talk more openly, being understood, and getting help with problems. Other helpful factors were the confidentiality of the service, the counsellor being like a friend, the independence of the counsellor, and not being judged. The main <strong>unhelpful factors</strong> mentioned were negative responses to the counsellor, gender issues, limitations of counselling (e.g. wanting more), feeling bad during counselling. Other unhelpful factors were the environment, differences between counsellors, and breaking of confidentiality.</td>
<td>Questionnaires were returned by 38% of past and existing service users. Although this is a low return rate, it does consist of 173 respondents. 71 clients (41% of those completing questionnaires) responded to an invitation to add comments regarding the client's experience of counselling. This followed a more structured series of questions e.g. ‘Did you feel free to discuss anything with the counsellor?’ which may have influenced some of the subsequent comments e.g. regarding ‘talking more openly’. The researcher was independent of the counselling service, but there is no mention of auditing of the results. However all of the comments from the questionnaires are included under each theme for the reader to view. Short semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with self-nominated individuals, who had already returned a questionnaire. As these clients volunteered to be interviewed, it may be that they were more predisposed towards the counselling service. Interviews were not recorded, responses were written down. Interview data was uncoded, sorted into general groups only.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> LEA-organised counselling in secondary schools in Dudley: Clients’ views on services.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Source:</strong> Dudley; Dudley Counselling Service</td>
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<td><strong>Year:</strong> 1999</td>
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<td>Bibliographic details</td>
<td>Therapy type</td>
<td>Details of respondents</td>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Key findings relevant to this review</td>
<td>Evaluation of paper</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Authors:</strong> Dunne, A., Thompson, W., &amp; Leitch, R.</td>
<td>Client-centred therapy and reality therapy</td>
<td>Pupils from one all-boys’ school in Ireland.  Aged 14–18  Female – 0  Male – 11</td>
<td>To investigate the reported experiences of counselling sessions of adolescent boys.</td>
<td>An open-ended questionnaire on the client's experience of helpful and hindering events, was completed at the end of each session for all participants (experiences of 23 counselling sessions)  5 of the clients (following 12 sessions which were audio-taped) were also interviewed regarding the parts of the sessions they had identified as helpful or unhelpful.  The client comments on the Helpful/Unhelpful Events Form were transcribed, as were the tapes of the post-session interviews. These were combined, divided into meaning units, analysed and categorised.</td>
<td>The main helpful factors clients reported were the opportunity to talk about problems and feelings, along with the ease of talking. The positive feelings, release of tension, being understood, having a new perspective, problem solving, clarifying ideas and focusing, were also seen as helpful. They found counsellor factors such as encouraging to talk, listening and summarising as helpful.  Another helpful factor was that counselling was different to other conversations, allowing the clients to ‘let things out’.  Few unhelpful factors were mentioned but these included experiencing uncomfortable feelings, unwanted thoughts, and not being able to focus.</td>
<td>Due to the fact that this study only involved a small number of participants (11) from one school, seen by one counsellor, the findings can only be generalised to other school-based counselling services with caution. Also as it was an all-boys’ school, there were no female participants in this study.  The clients were chosen and invited to participate, so there may be some bias.  The counsellor was the chief researcher in the study. This could have affected clients’ willingness to report negative views but there was some attempt to limit this impact – questionnaires were sealed and clients told that the counsellor-researcher would not look at these until the end of term.  Categories were audited by a colleague.  Questionnaires asked specifically about helpful/unhelpful factors, and interviewees were further questioned on this.  This is the only study in the review that measured helpful and unhelpful factors after each session rather than post-therapy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Bibliographic details

| Authors: | Hough, M. & Freire, E. |
| Title: | East Dunbartonshire: Counselling service evaluation report 2005/2007 |
| Source: | Glasgow: University of Strathclyde |
| Year: | 2007 |

### Therapy type

- Not stated

### Details of respondents

- Pupils from 10 secondary schools in East Dunbartonshire.
- Aged 11–18 approximately (S1 to S6)
- Female – 48% (approx. 108)
- Male – 52% (approx. 116)

### Aims

Evaluation of the East Dunbartonshire counselling service.

### Design

Post-counselling questionnaires were completed at the end of the client’s series of counselling sessions (64.2%) or at the end of a term (35.8%).

The questionnaire included a structured question which asked respondents to rate seven reasons why counselling may have helped them.

Also three open questions asked for other reasons why counselling was helpful or not helpful, and how the service could be improved.

The responses to the structured question were ranked according to how many clients answered ‘a lot’ to how helpful each factor was.

Qualitative responses were sorted into categories.

### Key findings relevant to this review

Structured responses to helpful factors were ranked:

1. talking to someone who would listen
2. confidentiality
3. get things off chest
4. receiving suggestions/advice
5. being asked questions
6. find out why you think, feel and behave in the way you do
7. work out new and better ways to behave

The main qualitative responses regarding helpful factors were the opportunity to talk and be listened to, the counsellor’s acceptance, self-understanding, having someone there, getting things off one’s chest, feeling understood, having time out, and confidentiality.

Other helpful factors were useful advice, not being told what to do and the counsellor being nice.

The main qualitative responses regarding unhelpful factors were having nothing to talk about, wanting more sessions and more advice or questions. However other unhelpful factors reported were too many questions and the counsellor being tense.

### Evaluation of paper

A large sample size of 224 pupils completed the post-counselling questionnaire. This was 73.2% of pupils who attended the counselling service, which is an excellent response rate.

93 of those who completed the questionnaire (31.4%) gave at least one qualitative answer regarding helpful or not helpful aspects of counselling.

The structured section of the questionnaire (containing 7 suggestions of helpful factors) may have influenced the subsequent qualitative responses given. Only the qualitative responses are included in the synthesis of results for this review.

The qualitative responses from the questionnaire are sorted into categories, and the comments themselves are also all included, showing which categories they were assigned to.

This is an extensive paper containing more detailed information than is included in this review e.g. pre- and post-counselling scores on the YP-CORE.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bibliographic details</th>
<th>Therapy type</th>
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<th>Aims</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Key findings relevant to this review</th>
<th>Evaluation of paper</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Cooper, M.</td>
<td>Person-centred most common approach (93%) (also systemic and CBT)</td>
<td>Pupils from 7 secondary schools in East Renfrewshire. Aged 11-17 Female – 57 Male – 33</td>
<td>Evaluation and development of the ERYCS counselling service.</td>
<td>‘Client Assessment of Counselling’ questionnaires containing both structured and open questions were given to clients who had completed therapy. The questionnaire included two open questions regarding useful elements of counselling and how counselling could be improved. These qualitative responses were coded into categories. (Counsellors also completed questionnaires but that data is not included in this review.)</td>
<td>Clients reported that by far the most helpful factor of therapy (out of 13 themes identified) was found to be ‘Talking and being listened to’, and to a lesser extent ‘Guidance and advice’. Other helpful factors were categorised as miscellaneous, confidentiality, specific improvements, and ‘everything’. Clients also mentioned getting things off one’s chest, independence of counsellor, problem-solving, self-esteem, feeling understood, non-judgemental, insight and awareness. ‘Nothing’ was the highest rated response to the question of unhelpful factors. Single responses were made regarding constant changing of appointments, counsellor to be in school more, pupils being unaware of the service.</td>
<td>This study has an excellent response rate of 78% of clients (a sample of 90). This may be due to there being a clear protocol for distribution of questionnaires at the end of term and the end of counselling. 66 clients (73% of those who completed questionnaires, which is a high proportion) made qualitative responses regarding useful elements of therapy. 34 clients (38%) gave responses regarding unhelpful elements, although most of those were coded under ‘nothing’ as unhelpful. Only three clients mentioned specific unhelpful factors. The qualitative responses from the questionnaire are coded into categories, with only examples of the type of responses being given in the paper. Data was analysed externally to the counselling service. Clients were informed that counsellors would not see their forms, so clients were not restricted in their responses. This is an extensive paper containing more detailed information than is included in this review e.g. counselling was associated with significant reductions in levels of psychological difficulties on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title: East Renfrewshire Youth Counselling Service (ERYCS): Analysis of the evaluation data.</td>
<td>Source: East Renfrewshire: East Renfrewshire Council.</td>
<td>Year: 2006</td>
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<th>Therapy type</th>
<th>Details of respondents</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Key findings relevant to this review</th>
<th>Evaluation of paper</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author:</strong> Cooper, M.</td>
<td>Predominantly person-centred approach (other elements brought in e.g. the teaching of relaxation methods)</td>
<td>Pupils from three secondary schools in Glasgow. Aged 11–18 approximately (S1 to S6)</td>
<td>An evaluation of the Glasgow Counselling in Schools Project.</td>
<td>Multi-method, pluralistic design, combining qualitative and quantitative evidence from multiple perspectives (this review only looks at the evidence from young people).</td>
<td>Most frequent response regarding helpful factors was the opportunity to ‘talk and be listened to’. ‘Getting things off one’s chest’ was also a common response.</td>
<td>The high response rate to questionnaires (69%) may be due to standardised evaluation protocols being clear (protocols included in the paper).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> Counselling in schools project: Evaluation report.</td>
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<td>97 (83%, which is a high proportion of respondents) gave an answer regarding helpful factors. Only seven (6%) gave an answer regarding unhelpful factors. 24 (21%) gave an answer regarding improvements to the service.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Source:</strong> Glasgow: Counselling Unit, University of Strathclyde.</td>
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<td>Some examples of comments are given under each category.</td>
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<td><strong>Year:</strong> 2004</td>
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<td>Includes in-depth descriptions of the methodological steps used in the evaluation process. The data analysis method is clearly described.</td>
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- **Questionnaires:** Female – 61; Male – 56
- **Interviews:** Female – 8; Male – 11

**Semi-structured interviews** (10 to 30 mins approx.) with former clients were recorded, transcribed, analysed, themes identified, then coded into categories with the help of NVivo (a qualitative analysis software package).

Confidentiality was an important factor for 63% of interviewees.

The main **unhelpful factor** mentioned was the lack of input by the counsellor. Other unhelpful factors mentioned were the duration of sessions, too serious, missing classes, lack of privacy.

**Improvements** suggested were that the counsellor should be around more, pupils should be able to contact the counsellor directly, and waiting times should be shorter.

The results were audited by an external specialist in counselling research.

This study viewed the key issues from a range of viewpoints (young people, teachers and counsellors), although only those regarding young people are included in this review.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bibliographic details</th>
<th>Therapy type</th>
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<th>Evaluation of paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Cooper, M.</td>
<td>Predominantly person-centred approach (other elements brought in e.g. the teaching of relaxation methods, use of art and play materials)</td>
<td>Pupils from 10 secondary schools in Glasgow. Aged 11–18 approximately (S1 to S6) Female – 53% (approx. 140) Male – 47% (approx. 124)</td>
<td>To evaluate the successfulness of the counselling service in the second phase of the Glasgow Counselling in Schools Project; and to evaluate the impact of the counselling on clients’ capacities to study and learn. Also to explore the value of the service to schools’ pastoral care provisions; the relationship between counselling and wider support services; the potential integration of counselling with the Social and Emotional Learning Frame (SELF) assessment system.</td>
<td>Pluralistic design, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies and obtaining multiple perspectives. Post-counselling questionnaires were distributed to all consenting clients. Qualitative items from the questionnaire were thematically analysed. Interviews were also conducted but are not included in this review as they did not cover helpful or unhelpful factors.</td>
<td>Clients most frequently said that the counselling was helpful because it gave them an opportunity to talk and be listened to. Other helpful factors mentioned were getting things off one’s chest, independence of counsellor, feeling understood, having someone there, confidentiality, insight, useful guidance/advice, counsellor’s acceptance and that counselling was a self-directed process. The only unhelpful factors mentioned were wanting more counselling, and counselling as generally not helpful. Improvements suggested were that the counsellor should be more proactive and use other strategies, sessions could be more frequent or longer, the room could be brighter and in a more private location, the service should be promoted more and perhaps hot drinks should be provided.</td>
<td>This paper contains a large sample size of 264, which is an excellent response rate of 80% of clients completing post-counselling questionnaires. This high response rate is possibly due to standardised evaluation protocols being in place. 129 participants (49% of questionnaire respondents) gave a qualitative answer regarding helpful or unhelpful factors. Some examples of comments are given under each category. A description of the methodological protocols is included in the paper. Results were audited by the evaluation’s Chief Investigator, plus a final reliability check. This paper is a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of a school-based counselling service, containing a lot more detailed information than is included in this review e.g. the impact of counselling on learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Bibliographic details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors:</th>
<th>Freire, E., &amp; Cooper, M.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td>Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year:</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Therapy type**

- Not stated (but most probably person-centred like the previous evaluations of this counselling service)

**Details of respondents**

- Pupils from 12 secondary schools in Glasgow.
- Aged 11–18 (S1 to S6)
- Female – 56%
- Male – 44%

**Aims**

- Evaluation of the Glasgow Counselling in Schools Project.

**Design**

- Clients were asked to complete the questionnaire at the end of term and the end of therapy.
- The questionnaire contained structured questions, plus two follow-up open questions allowing for qualitative responses regarding helpful and unhelpful factors.

**Key findings relevant to this review**

- The most frequent response regarding helpful factors was the opportunity to talk and listen. This was followed by the opportunity to get things off one’s chest, the independence of the counsellor, the counsellor’s personal qualities, insight and self-understanding. Also mentioned was the counsellor giving advice, understanding, confidentiality, acceptance, and problem solving.
- No information regarding unhelpful factors.

**Evaluation of paper**

- 292 post-therapy questionnaires give a response rate of 63%. However qualitative responses are taken from all questionnaires (381 including those completed at the end of term).
- This paper contains the largest number of respondents giving a qualitative answer regarding helpful aspects of counselling. 268 of those who completed the questionnaires (70.3%) gave qualitative answers, although it is not clear how many of these are post-therapy or end of term.
- No examples of the qualitative comments are given.
- No available data regarding unhelpful factors.
## Helpful and Unhelpful Factors in School-Based Counselling: Clients' Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bibliographic details</th>
<th>Therapy type</th>
<th>Details of respondents</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Key findings relevant to this review</th>
<th>Evaluation of paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authors:</strong> Lynass, R., Pykhtina, O., &amp; Cooper, M.</td>
<td>Humanistic/person-centred</td>
<td>Pupils from five secondary schools – three in Glasgow and two in County Durham.</td>
<td>To gain an understanding of young people’s experience of what they found helpful and unhelpful about the counselling they received.</td>
<td>Pluralistic method, quantitative data presented alongside qualitative data.</td>
<td>The most commonly cited helpful aspects of counselling were related to talking or getting things out, counsellor’s personal qualities, being able to talk about things that they felt unable to talk to family/friends about, having other help alongside counselling, feeling listened to/understood and confidentiality/privacy.</td>
<td>Small sample size, only 11 clients interviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title:</strong> A thematic analysis of young people’s experience of counselling in five secondary schools in the UK</td>
<td></td>
<td>Aged 13–15</td>
<td></td>
<td>This study was part of a larger randomised controlled trial of school-based therapeutic counselling [39].</td>
<td></td>
<td>This study was part of a larger randomised controlled trial, so all interviewees received a similar counselling intervention. The authors state that the interviewees were representative of all young people receiving counselling (not self- or teacher-selected).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source:</strong> Counselling and Psychotherapy Research: Linking research with practice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Female – 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>However being part of this larger study meant that counselling interventions were shorter term than in the other studies (2–6 sessions).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year:</strong> 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Male – 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews were carried out at the end of therapy and followed a standardised protocol. Interview questions are contained in the paper; these include specific questions regarding helpful and unhelpful factors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[30]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions is clearly explained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Some examples of comments are given under each theme.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>The analysis was audited by a second researcher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Helpful and unhelpful factors in school-based counselling: clients’ perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bibliographic details</th>
<th>Therapy type</th>
<th>Details of respondents</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Key findings relevant to this review</th>
<th>Evaluation of paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Author:** McArthur, K. | Humanistic | Pupils from three secondary schools in socially deprived areas of Glasgow. | To explore the processes of change for young people in school-based humanistic counselling. | Analysis of qualitative data collected during a randomised controlled trial of school-based humanistic counselling [41]. | The most helpful factors related to counsellors, were their personal qualities, independence, listening, advice, talking, understanding and counsellor-led activities. The most frequently mentioned helpful factor related to clients was the opportunity to talk about emotions, as well as talking about specific emotions or subjects. Helpful relational factors included comfort and ease in relating, dialogue, liking and closeness, and trust. Practical helpful factors were confidentiality, timing of sessions, and the school context. Clients also mentioned asking questions, having time to think, and number of sessions. | Small sample size, 14 clients interviewed. |}

| **Source:** Paper presented at the 19th BACP Research Conference, Birmingham | **Year:** 2013 | **Aged 13–16** | **Female – 6**, **Male – 8** | **Semi-structured interviews were conducted approximately 12 weeks after the start of counselling, using an adapted version of the Client Change Interview protocol [42].** | **Interviews were recorded, meaning units transcribed, units grouped to form categories.** | **Examples of categorised comments were not available for this review.** | **10% of categories were audited by a second researcher.** |

Other unhelpful aspects mentioned were, wanting the counsellor to talk more, ask more questions, give more advice, and more activities. Clients also mentioned wanting more counselling or less frequent sessions.

This study is part of a larger randomised controlled trial, so all clients who were interviewed had been allocated to a similar humanistic counselling intervention. Interviews were carried out approximately 12 weeks after the start of counselling and followed a standardised protocol. Specific questions on helpful and hindering factors were asked, as well as allowing for general comments. Examples of categorised comments were not available for this review.
Helpful and unhelpful factors in school-based counselling: clients' perspectives

Bibliographic details

Author: McArthur, K.
Title: Change processes in school-based humanistic counselling: A qualitative interview study.
Source: Paper presented at the 19th BACP Research Conference, Birmingham (results received through personal communication with author).
Year: 2013

Humanistic pupils from three secondary schools in socially deprived areas of Glasgow. Aged 13–16 Female – 6 Male – 8

To explore the processes of change for young people in school-based humanistic counselling.

Analysis of qualitative data collected during a randomised controlled trial of school-based humanistic counselling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted approximately 12 weeks after the start of counselling, using an adapted version of the Client Change Interview protocol. Interviews were recorded, meaning units transcribed, units grouped to form categories.

The most helpful factors related to counsellors, were their personal qualities, independence, listening, advice, talking, understanding and counsellor-led activities. The most frequently mentioned helpful factor related to clients was the opportunity to talk about emotions, as well as talking about specific emotions or subjects. Helpful relational factors included comfort and ease in relating, dialogue, liking and closeness, and trust. Practical helpful factors were confidentiality, timing of sessions, and the school context. Clients also mentioned being asked questions, having time to think, and number of sessions.

The most frequently mentioned unhelpful factors were difficulty in talking, awkwardness, and various practical issues. Other unhelpful aspects mentioned were, wanting the counsellor to talk more, ask more questions, give more advice, and more activities. Clients also mentioned wanting more counselling or less frequent sessions.

Small sample size, 14 clients interviewed.

This study is part of a larger randomised controlled trial, so all clients who were interviewed had been allocated to a similar humanistic counselling intervention. Interviews were carried out approximately 12 weeks after the start of counselling and followed a standardised protocol. Specific questions on helpful and hindering factors were asked, as well as allowing for general comments. Examples of categorised comments were not available for this review. 10% of categories were audited by a second researcher.